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ABSTRACT

Last year, the Writing Center at the University of Wyoming saw a 100% increase in conferences held with graduate student research writers. Reactions of writing center staff to this development were not entirely positive because: (1) writers came with documents that were too long to discuss in a 30-minute conference and still expected a "quick fix;" (2) many of these writers, especially English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students, wanted the center staff to edit for them; (3) faculty advisors' annotations and revision directions often made little sense; and (4) writing center staff often could not understand students' material or discipline well enough to offer good advice. Over time, center staff came to understand that many of these students, especially the ESL students, did have problems that required assistance, and that offering such assistance was extremely difficult. The center eventually developed a process which involved a triangular collaboration, called "trialogue." By making initial contact with the advisor before beginning to conference with students, center staff were able to bring together all major pieces of the research writing context and thus counsel students how they can effectively produce good writing suited to their fields. The development of the trialogue model led to examination of the occurance of thesis writing problems on a local and national level and to development of a program designed to evaluate the trialogue model. (SAM)

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Presentation: Conference on College Composition and Communication, April 1, 1993

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Helping the Graduate Thesis Writer Through Faculty and Writing Center Collaboration

[Note. I am assistant director and member of the conferencing staff of a writing center staffed primarily by English Department faculty--ten of us--as part of our teaching loads. I mention this at the outset, by way of clarification, since I think the fact that ours is a professionally staffed writing center is important to some of the kinds of things we can do.]

Last year, the Writing Center at the University of Wyoming experienced a 100 percent increase in number of conferences with graduate research writers. In practical terms, this meant nearly 250 such conferences. The increase was part of broader increases we experienced in conferences with research writers in general and with ESL research writers. Although we are not completely sure why these increases have occurred, they are apparently brought about, at least in part, by a new writing-across-the-curriculum program, which has resulted in (1) more writing and awareness of writing issues and problems in content-areas courses and (2) a larger role and more visibility for the Writing Center. Increases in conferences with graduate research writers has not been entirely an overnight development, however. Although last year's increase was dramatic, it was actually part of a trend that began about five years ago. In the process of understanding and adapting to these changes, we have gradually come to rethink our approach to working

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with research writers, especially graduate thesis and dissertation writers.

This "rethinking," not been an entirely easy process. Initially, larger numbers of graduate thesis conferences appeared to mean larger numbers of two other types of problematic conferences, conferences with ESL writers and conferences with writers requesting sentence-level editing. Our first reactions to the substantial increase in graduate thesis and dissertation conferencing were, in fact, not entirely positive, for all sorts of reasons:

> --Writers came to us with documents that were too long to discuss effectively in our usual 30-minute conferences--and they often expected "quick fixes."
>
> --They wanted us to edit for them--with ESL writers especially, often word by word. We, of course, would not do so, but, more often than we liked, we found ourselves forced to explain the wisdom of this policy to desperate graduate students. Moreover, I think we felt uneasy sending these writers away, perhaps because we sensed they really needed help of some sort.
>
> --Sometimes they actually came with messages or directions from their advisers, but messages that made little sense to us when we looked at their drafts. "A problem of language," one advisor wrote. "What does that mean?," we asked ourselves. "Articles and agreement

problems," the ESL writer told us. "Maybe diction, voice, or sentence structure," we thought. Transitions between paragraphs, we eventually learned when we spoke to the advisor. Sometimes the directives were even vaguer: "This is wrong, see the Writing Center to fix it."

--Also, more often than we liked to admit perhaps, we were unable to assist thesis and dissertation writers in substantive ways because we could not understand their material or their disciplines well enough to be sure we would help them locate "real" problems and would give them good advice or reinforce good solutions.

Thus, our initial responses to the increases described here were often discouragement and frustration. Seeing beyond the frustrations has been a gradual process of several parts or stages, during which we have accumulated a substantial amount of data. The quantifiable parts of that data are currently being analyzed and readied for presentation. This presentation will focus on what was actually first stage of that process, the stage that, for us, laid the theoretical underpinnings.

Over time, our conferencing staff has come to understand two important things about the difficulties we were experiencing with graduate thesis and dissertation conferencing:

1. Although these writers often appeared to be asking us for inappropriate kinds of assistance with their writing,

many of the them did have problems that properly merited our assistance, problems typically masked by either the writers' unfamiliarity with the rhetoric of academic English or by our unfamiliarity with their specialized content and disciplinary conventions.

2. As the previous comment implies, we had problems of our own that were making it difficult to provide efficient and substantive assistance.

Writer-based Difficulties

Our writing center staff began to see that graduate thesis and dissertation writers face some obstacles not generally recognized by the broader campus community, obstacles that increase their difficulties in completing their tasks.

Most faculty working with graduate thesis and dissertation writers tend to see them essentially as experienced or expert writers in their fields. After all, they are graduate students. They have taken a lot of courses in their areas--maybe even written a lot of papers. Academia tends to see the thesis as the logical culmination of a process in which students have long been engaged. In some ways at least, this is a misconception.

When graduate students begin writing theses and dissertations, they typically leave a familiar writing environment, the classroom, where their instructors have assigned and evaluated writing tasks and enter a new, professional community where they must begin to write as peers. Often, advisors and even the students themselves do not recognize this shift in discourse communities, though students may have great difficulty adapting to it. For them,

producing typical academic coursework is likely to be more comfortable and natural than taking a place in a community of peers and finding a voice to express their membership in that community. Thus, although their departments, advisors, and the university may see them as experienced writers in their fields at this stage of their education, they are, to a lesser or greater extent, actually novice writers in this new context--and face some of the difficulties of novice writers.

The difficulties graduate thesis writers face as a result of everyone's lack of awareness of the shift in which they are involved is further complicated by the substantial variation in expectations and models for research writing from discipline to discipline. That variation makes it difficult for writers to discover the guidance they need as they attempt to enter their new peer communities. In this sense, graduate writers may be literally cast adrift by the system, expected to know how to complete a task that they have never faced before. This is particularly true for the increasing number of international graduate students our Writing Center sees, who bring the complication of other cultural and rhetorical assumptions to an already difficult writing context.

Our first major realization, then, was that we were often making the same misjudgment in our approach to graduate thesis and dissertation writers that the rest of the university community made. We expected that, as graduate students about to complete degrees, they knew--or ought to know--how to do the writing required in their fields. While we are seldom surprised to find

freshman composition students, for example, requesting help with grammar or punctuation when what they really need is help with focus or structure, we did not expect that kind of response from graduate writers. As the number of requests for graduate conferencing increased, however, we began to suspect that this was often what we were seeing. The problem, of course, was harder for us to recognize and even harder to respond to because the complexity of content and sophistication of task got in the way.

Writing Center-based Difficulties

The previous realization points to a second aspect of our problems in working with graduate thesis and dissertation writers, a writing center-based difficulty. We began to suspect that the model conference approach that we had been using with great success with undergraduate writers in basic courses across the curriculum did not work well with research writers in the disciplines, particularly graduate thesis and dissertation writers. This approach, basically a one-on-one discovery process or dialogue based on writing process and writing to learn strategies, has two central problems in this context: (1) it presumes a sort of generic, all-purpose rhetoric underlying academic writing, rather than the actual, multiparadigm, multidiscipline community that exists in research writing; and (2) it utilizes collaborative conferencing methods that depend upon one or both of the parties to the conference knowing the "answer" to the questions or solution to the problems of the writer--or at least recognizing a good answer or solution. (Here, it is quite possible that neither writer nor writing center conferencer knows the "answer." As already

suggested, writing center faculty are in a particularly difficult situation in this regard. Working with unfamiliar material and conventions, often in highly technical contexts, they are unlikely to be able to (1) frame questions that will help the student "discover" an answer or (2) more important, recognize "good" solutions when they appear and reinforce them.)

Over time, it became clear to us that our typical conferencing strategies were unlikely to provide substantive help to graduate thesis and dissertation writers in the face of (1) the multiple objectives and models for graduate research writing across campus and (2) technical material of high density and sophistication. We also began to see, coincidentally, that, in a situation where neither party fully understood the expectations of the discipline, working on sentence-level issues might be the only kind of work possible. In essence, we often ended up working with graduate thesis writers on problems of basic grammar and correctness by default, since even when we sensed larger problems, the content, conventions, and expectations of the writers' disciplines were too unfamiliar for us to tackle with assurance.

The Trialogue Model

As a result, our writing center began to search for a new model for working with graduate thesis and dissertation writers in the Writing Center. We eventually developed a process for which one of our faculty coined the term "trialogue," to distinguish it from our usual socratically based dialogue.

It appeared that what we needed to provide efficient and substantive assistance to graduate research writers was to bring someone who actually knew the answers to their questions into active participation in the discussion--i.e., the advisor, the experienced content-area writer. We realized that, although we had always talked of writing center collaboration as a involving three persons--the writer, the writing center conferencer, and the instructor--, we had, in reality, seldom made use of the content-area expert in conferencing. Any contact we had with the instructor or advisor typically occurred through the student: direct discussion was the exception, not the rule.

The conclusion that we needed to make contact with the advisor a regular part of work with graduate thesis writers seems a fairly simple one in retrospect; it did not seem quite as simple at the time. It diverged from our practice, our well-ingrained notions of model writing center conferencing (e.g., our sense that proper protocol meant never contacting an instructor unless a writer requested it). Regularizing contact with thesis advisors was a key step in our ability to work with graduate research writers, however. It led to new paradigm for conferencing with those writers, which we tried experimentally for one year and have now adopted as standard procedure.

In practical terms, we establish the triangular collaboration by making an <u>initial</u> contact with the advisor a formal part of our work with thesis and dissertation writers <u>before</u> we begin any conferencing on drafts. Our first conference with graduate thesis writers essentially introduces them to our thesis conferencing

process and provides us with the writer's impressions of the work we need to accomplish. After that first conference, we contact the thesis director and discuss his/her perception of where the student is in the writing process and what the director hopes will come out of our conferences with that student. We then set up a file to record the resulting objectives of the work and to trace its progress. Of course, we continue contact with the advisor, once established, on an as-needed basis, until the writer's problems are solved.

As indicated earlier, one of our staff coined the term trialogue for this new model, an active, three-way collaboration, to which all participants bring a body of knowledge that must be included in the process of research writing: (1) the advisor, the expectations of the discipline or discourse community; (2) the Writing Center, the writing process and collaborative learning methods; (3) the student, the research topic, data, and relevant analysis, as reflected in the drafts. The writing context, then, is co-constructive. By communicating some of their knowledge to the others, all participants in the process come to understand what is needed for the student to produce a good piece of research writing in a articular context. The two kinds of writing instructors, one experienced in content area writing and the other in writing process, work together help the student writer acquire skills that either instructor would find it more difficult to teach alone.

The goal of this triangular relationship is, obviously, to teach students how to actually write in their disciplines, not

merely to ensure that they finish a piece of research writing. It responds to a real problem some faculty have expressed. Too often in the past, it appears, research faculty who had difficulty working with their graduate students' writing found themselves choosing one of two alternatives: (1) they let their students gather data and then did substantial parts of the writing or reworking of the writing themselves or (2) they sent the students to the writing center with instructions that turned out to be vague, hoping the Writing Center would be able to solve or help solve the problems the advisor could see. Often, this hope was futile since Writing Center staff, unfamiliar with highly technical content and disciplinary convention, ended up working by default on sentence-level cosmetics rather than the substantive issues the writers needed to confront. Under either option, students had difficulty learning how to do research writing themselves and joining the conversations of their disciplines. The collaboration involved in the trialogue model aims at bringing together all pieces of the research writing context so that students can actually understand and learn to produce writing in their fields.

The development of the trialogue model is the first piece of a larger puzzle we have been working to solve. Part of that solution has necessarily been to validate our common-sense perceptions about what we see happening, to ask just how widespread the problems with graduate thesis and dissertation writing are, both on our campus and nationwide, and whether other Writing Centers have experienced similar difficulties in working with graduate research writers. These questions led to a second major

phase of our project--a series of three surveys of information related to graduate thesis and dissertation writing and the writing center's role in teaching it. The surveys were developed during spring and summer of 1992 and distributed that fall to (1) graduate faculty on our campus who had supervised theses ordissertations in the past three years, (2) University of Wyoming students who had written graduate theses or dissertations in the past three years, and (3) writing centers at graduate institutions across country. Data from the ESL portion of the Writing Center survey will be presented at TESOL in Atlanta about a month from now. The remainder of the data is currently being analyzed and readied for presentation.

A third major part of this project has been to measure the effectiveness of the trialogue approach in a more closely controlled environment. To that end, we are involved in an ongoing study applying the trialogue process to a graduate research group in computer science. The six-member group, five of whom are non-native speakers, are writing theses or dissertations in fault tolerant computing. They provide us with the opportunity to observe the effectiveness of our new paradigm in an orderly fashion with several students working in the same area with same professor from the beginning of their thesis writing processes to the end. Close collaboration with the professor also allows us to collect fuller information on the writers and their backgrounds and get more insight into the advisor/graduate student relationship than we typically can. More complete results of this project will be forthcoming soon.

Briefly, what our experiences to date with all of these projects have shown us is that the problem under consideration is a real one and that it is relatively widespread on our campus. We have discovered that, more often than we might expect, thesis writers (and their directors) are frustrated by a writing context they do no not entirely understand and where there are few, if any, form l courses to assist them. Preliminary information from the surveys tells us that our writing center is not alone in struggling with these pressures. Of the 75 writing centers at graduate institutions who responded to our survey, 74 conference with graduate thesis and dissertation writers. The difficulties they report in working with these writers mirror our experiences as described at the outset. None of these centers reports having a formal policy for contacting the advisors of graduate research writers, although several refer to the usefulness--even the necessity--of some contact in many cases. Our experiences and our survey information suggest that, unless Writing Centers establish an undergraduates-only policy, they will almost inevitably face some of the questions we have faced and experience similar difficulties answering them with recourse to conventional conferencing strategies. The trialogue process seems to us a first step toward a more efficient and effective method for providing substantive help to these writers. We are very much interested in testing our experience against yours as we work to strengthen this approach.